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Some differences between Standard English (SE) and "Black English" (BE) have important consequences in communication of messages. The authors cite as an example the "habitual" function of the finite verb "be" which has no equivalent in SE. They point out that "simplification" of the English of the Bible may result in a "translation" which is inappropriate for the users for which it is intended. Although unhappy with the conventional spelling, both as representing SE pronunciation rather than BE pronunciation and as incapable of dealing with changes of pronunciation that occur in different style levels, the authors justify standard orthography both linguistically and sociologically. Identification of Afro-Americans with distinctive speech styles and the general adolescent rejection of speech norms, may lead to acceptance of this type of translation and its desirability of those involved in ghetto ministry. The actual translation is accompanied by notes giving the linguistic explanation for each variation from SE. (MK)

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A BLACK ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF JOHN 3:1-21;

WITH GRAMMATICAL ANNOTATIONS

A MANUSCRIPT

submitted to

THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

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A BLACK ENGLISH[1] TRANSLATION OF JOHN 3:1-21; WITH GRAMMATICAL ANNOTATIONS

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Within the last half century the populations of many urban areas have been drastically restructured. Extensive in-migration by Southern Negroes has resulted in the growth of many large isolated Negro communities. The segregated rural populations of the South have thus become the isolated Negro communities of our metropolitan areas. Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have all pointed out the cultural gap that exists between the so-called ghetto culture and the culture of mainstream middle class American society. Until recently the linguistic consequences of this cultural difference have either been overlooked or disregarded. The speech behavior of many lower socio-economic class Negroes was simply considered on a par with that of lower socio-economic white citizens who spoke a variety of nonstandard English. Even some dialectologists simply assumed that the speech of the uneducated Negro was no different from that of the uneducated Southern white. Recent descriptive and sociolinguistic studies of

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1. "Black English" is appropriate as a label for the dialect of lower socio-economic class Negroes for at least three reasons. First, there is a precedent for designating dialects with color names (Black Bobo, Red Tai, White Russian). In the second place, the current use of the term "black" in throwing off pejorative stereo-types of Negro life matches our efforts to overcome the stereotype that this dialect is simply bad English. Finally, the name "Black English" avoids the negative connotations of terms which include words like "dialect", "substandard" and even "nonstandard".

the variety of English spoken by urban ghetto dwellers (i.e. Black English), however, have indicated that there are important systematic differences between Black English and Standard English.

At this point, one may ask why the speech behavior found in these isolated Negro communities should differ significantly from the nonstandard variety of English spoken by the lower socio-economic class white. For an explanation, one need only look at the distinct history of the Negro in American life both in terms of his original immigration and his subsequent segregation. Recently, creole specialists have been particularly occupied with pointing out the historical derivation of Black English, tracing its origin to a rather widespread creole spoken in the Caribbean area. Creolist, William A. Stewart, notes:

> Of those Africans who fell victim of the Atlantic slave trade and were brought to the New World many found it necessary to learn some kind of English. With very few exceptions the form of English they acquired was a pidginized one, and this kind of English became so well established as the principal medium of communication between Negro slaves in the British colonies that it was passed on as a creole language to succeeding generations of the New World Negroes, for whom it was their native tongue[2].

Present day Negro dialect, according to Stewart, has resulted from a process which he labels "de-creolization". That is, some of the

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2. William A. Stewart, "Sociolinguistic Factors in the History of American Negro Dialects". The Florida FL Reporter, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1967) p. 2.

original features characterizing the creole variety of English spoken by the early Negro slaves were lost through a gradual merging of the creole with the British-derived dialects with which they came in contact. The lexical inventory of this language variety became, for all practical purposes, identical with English (a process called "relexification" by Stewart). Due to the persistance of segregation, however, the process of decreolization was neither instantaneous nor complete. Thus, the nonstandard speech of present day Negroes still exhibits structural traces of a creole predecessor.

Present research by linguists has focused on Black English both as a system in itself and as a variety of English which systematically differs from Standard English. Some of the differences between Standard English and Black English, though seemingly small, have important consequences for the communication of a message. Furthermore, many of the systematic differences between Standard English and Black English have been overlooked by psychologists, sociologists, and educators, who simply dismiss Black English as an inaccurate and unworthy approximation of Standard English. To illustrate this point, we may briefly cite the Black English use of the form <u>be</u> as a finite verb, in a sentence such as <u>He be at work</u>. This particular use of <u>be</u>, a well-known sytereotyped characteristic of Black English, has been dismissed as simply an inaccurate attempt by the lower socio-economic class Negro to approximate the Standard English speech norm. But such is clearly not the case. A study of the gram-

matical and semantic function of this construction employing the descriptive technique of modern linguistic theory reveals that one function of "finite be" has an "habitual" or "iterative" meaning for the Black English speaker. There is no equivalent category in Standard English and such a meaning can only be conveyed by a circumlocution (e.g. He is at work all the time). Thus, we see a clear-cut difference between the two grammatical systems. As will be seen in the annotated translation, there are a number of consequential systematic differences between Black English and Standard English.

Now let us consider the implication of the above discussion for the translation of portions of Scripture into Black English. We observe clear-cut differences between the grammatical system of Black English and Standard English. The normal processes which account for dialect differences have been augmented by a creole substratum. Can one translation of the Bible using a "simplified" or "basic" English grammar and vocabulary be considered adequate for the uneducated Negro as well as the white? Considering the grammatical differences which exist between the two varieties of English we would have to answer in the negative. Certainly, some lower socio-economic class speakers read these translations and with some apparent understanding. We certainly would not argue that the Black English speaker is going to understand about as much of an English translation as a monolingual Hindi speaker reading an English translation. But we must raise the question, do we

want a translation which will require a considerable amount of inter-dialectal "re-translation" with inevitable information loss (and some of it crucial) or do we want a translation which sounds indigenous to the people reading it? Do we want a translation which makes God sound like a white middle class American or do we want a translation which makes God sound like his message is appropppriate for the ghetto?

Although the translation is linguistically justifiable, there remain a number of sociological factors which must be taken into account in connection with its use. The first has to do with orthography. As the reader can see, we have opted for standard orthography and conventional spelling. This is clearly preferable when the complete setting, including other printed material, official education, etc., are examined. But a linguistic question arises concerning the differences in the phonologies of Black English and Standard English. If these differences are extensive, might not the conventional spelling be so inconsistent with the phonology that a serious reading problem would result?

If the ideal alphabetic writing system is considered to be a phonemic one, and if the value of an alphabet is measured by its departure from the principle of one symbol for one phoneme, then it must be concluded that standard orthography and conventional spelling is considerably less adequate for Black English than it is for Standard English. For example words which end in /θ/ in Standard English (e.g. /tuθ/ 'tooth', /brɛθ/ 'breath') typically end in /f/ in Black English (e.g. /tuf/ 'tooth', /brɛf/ 'breath'). Yet /f/ and /θ/ are phonemically distinct because of such minimal pairs as 'fought' /fɔt/ and 'thought' /θɔt/. As a result, while the correct spelling

for 'with in Standard English according to the phonemic principle is <u>with</u>, the correct Black English spelling by the same principle would be <u>wif</u>. Extra-linguistic factors, however, force us to go against our linguistic better judgment (if we accept the phonemic spelling principle), opt for conventional spelling, and be stuck with spelling anomalies.

But there is considerable evidence that the ideal spelling system is not one that complies with the phonemic principle. Alphabetic symbols, in an alternate view, would not match phonemes, but phonological units at a more abstract level.[3] In the case of word-final /f/ in Black English, it can be shown that the instances of /f/ which correspond to /θ/ in Standard English are distinct from those which do not. In rapid speech, the /f/ which matches Standard /θ/ may become /t/, while the /f/ which matches Standard /f/ may not. As a result, while:

/gɛt ɔf may bayk/ 'Get off my bike!'
/kəm bæk wIf may bayk/ 'Come back with my bike!'
/kəm bæk wIt may bayk/ 'Come back with my bike!'

are all possible in Black English,

*/gɛt ɔt may bayk/

is not possible for 'Get off my bike!' Although /θ/ generally does not occur at the end of a word, <u>th</u> is an appropriate spelling for word-final /f/ which alternates with /t/. A number of other apparent phonemic differences between the two dialects investigated by the

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3. This is argued from the point of view of generative phonology in Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle, <u>The Sound Pattern of English</u> (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) p. 49-50, and from a more structuralist point of view in Henry Lee Smith, Jr. "The Concept of the Morphophone", Language 43 (1967) p. 318-322.

authors are analyzable in the same way. Conventional spelling, then, in standard orthography seems justifiable not only sociologically, but linguistically as well.

A second problem in connection with the use of the proposed translation is one of applicability. There are many young people who are poor Negro ghetto residents and potentially an audience for this translation, but have learned Standard English regardless of their background. For these people, the Black English translation would scarcely be more applicable than it would be to any other speaker of Standard English. This problem is easily overcome by sensitive rather than indiscriminate use of the translation by those involved in ghetto ministry.

A third problem is a more serious one. The degree to which the translation would be acceptable, even to bona fide Black English speakers in an unanswered question. Sociolinguistic research has shown that speakers who use socially stigmatized speech forms sometimes have the same low opinion of such forms as do speakers who do not use them. A possible result of this is that although the Black English translation might be clearer and more natural to some, it may not be acceptable because of the presence of these stigmatized forms.[4] This question is an empirical one and the authors plan to test acceptability in the near future. There are two factors which may tend to neutralize rejection, however. Most groups involved in

4. This problem is not peculiar to our situation. Some missionaries to Latin American Indians report that the Indians refuse to learn to read their own language and wish only to read Spanish because of its prestige, even though their comprehension of Spanish is very low.

ghetto evangelism seem to be largely interested in adolescents. Adolescents in general seem to reject general speech norms both consciously and unconsciously, and this tendency may lead to acceptance of the translation by this group if not the general population. The second factor is the new mood of racial pride among American Negroes. This mood, which is more pervasive in the Negro community than many whites may suspect, leads Negroes to seek those parts of their background, both in Africa and in America, which pertain distinctively to them. As a result, we see an emphasis on Negro history, "African bush" hair styles, and neo-African clothing styles. Should the leadership of this movement ever realize that Black English, their own dialect of English, is as distinctively Afro-American as anything they are likely to find in this culture, the result is sure to be dialectal pride with conscious effort to preserve it and make it even more diverse from Standard English. If this developes, the use of a Black English translation of the Bible would not only be a good idea, but a necessity.

Several comments on the actual translation and annotations used here should be explained before actually reading the passage. We have, in the first place, approached our translation task with the same rigor expected of any serious translation of the Scriptures. That is, we have attempted to be faithful to the form and content of the original manuscript. Our translation must therefore be distinguished from attempts to "paraphrase" the Bible into contemporary cultural parallels of the original message. We have deliberately excluded contemporary or regional Black English slang. Several

instances which may appear to be slang to the white middle class reader can be justified as relatively stable expressions within the ghetto which have been adopted as slang by middle class white society.

As far as the annotations are concerned, one will observe that we have mainly noted those places where clear-cut contrasts between the grammatical systems of Standard English and Black English exist. The only reference to phonological differences deals with phonology as it intersects with the grammar of Black English. Differences in the semantic content of lexical items have not generally been noted.

John 3: 1-21 (Black English Version)

1. It[1] was a man named[2] Nicodemus. He was a leader of the Jews.

2. This man, he[3] come[4,5] to Jesus in the night and say[4,5], "Rabbi, we know you[6] a teacher that come[5] from God, cause can't nobody[7] do the things you be[8] doing 'cept God[6] with him.

3. Jesus, he[3] tell him say[9], "This ain't[10] no jive[11] if a man ain't born over again, ain't no way he[6] gonna get to know God."

4. Then Nicodemus, he[3] ask him, say[9] "How[6] a man gonna be born when he[6] already old? Can't nobody[7] go back inside his mother and get[12] born."

5. So Jesus tell him, say[9] "This ain't[10] no jive[11], this[6] the truth. The onliest way a man[6] gonna get to know God,[6] he got to get born regular and he got to get[12] born from the Holy Spirit.

6. The body can only make a body get[12] born, but the Spirit, he[3] make[5] a man so he can know God.

7. Don't be surprised just cause I tell you that you got to be born over again.

8. The wind blow[5] where it want to blow and you can't hardly[10] tell where it's[13] coming from and where it's[13] going to. That's[23] how it go[5] when somebody[6] born over again by the Spirit."

9. So Nicodemus say[4,5], "How[14] you know that?"

10. Jesus say, "You call yourself[15] a teacher that teach[5] Isreal and you don't know these kind of things?

11. I'm gonna tell you, we talking about something we know about cause we already seen it. We[6] telling it like it is[16] and you'all[17] think we jiving.

12. If I tell you about things you can see and you'all[17] think we[6] jiving[11] and don't believe me what's[13] gonna happen when I tell about things you can't see?

13. Ain't nobody[10] gone up to Heaven 'cept Jesus, who come[4,5] down from Heaven.

14. Just like Moses done[1] hung up the snake in the wilderness, Jesus got to be hung up.

15. So that people that believe in him, he can give them[3] real life that ain't never[10] gonna end.

16. God really did love everybody in the world. In fact, he loved[2] that people so much that he done[19] gave up the onliest Son he had. Any man that believe[5] in him, he[6] gonna have a life that ain't never gonna end. He ain't never[10] gonna die.

17. God, he[3] didn't send his Son to the world to act like a judge, but he sent him to rescue the peoples[20] in the world.

18. Nobody[6] gonna judge the man that believe in God[21] onliest Son; but the man that ain't believed[2], God been[22] judged[2] him cause he ain't believed[2] in God[21] onliest Son.

19. This[3] how the judging go. The light done[19] came in the world, but the peoples loved[2] the dark better than the light, cause they be[3] doing wrong things.

20. Everybody that do bad, they[23] hate the light and ain't gonna come to the light cause they don't want nobody[10] to find out what they be[8] doing.

21. But the peoples[20] that act right, they[6] gonna come to the light so peoples[20] can see that God be[8] helping them with what they be[8] doing.

1. "It", in Black English, can be used as an "expletive" or "presentative" in addition to its function as a pronoun referring to a specific object or participant. In this usage it is equivalent to Standard English "there."
2. When the suffix -ed is realized by a stop following a base form which ends in a consonant, the stop is not pronounced (Thus, the pronunciation /neym/ for Standard English /neymd/). This reflects a Black English phonological pattern in which syllable final consonant clusters in Standard English correspond to simple consonants in Black English. The pattern illustrates how phonological contraints in Black English affect the presence of certain grammatical categories.
3. A pronoun is often used following the noun subject of a sentence in Black English. "Pronominal apposition" functions to focus on the "topic" of the sentence and to indicate the re-entry of a participant in a discourse (See verse 4).
4. Some verbs, like "come" and "say" are not marked for past tense in Black English narratives, even when the context is past time.
5. Black English lacks the -s suffix which marks the present tense with third person singular subjects in Standard English.
6. The present tense form of the copula is not realized in a number of different syntactic environments in Black English. Generally where the contracted form of the copula may occur in Standard English the stative condition is indicated simply by word order in Black English.

7. There are two types of emphatic negative sentences in Black English involving the pre-position of a negativized auxiliary. Black English, unlike most white nonstandard dialects, permits both an indefinite subject and the main verb to carry negative markers. Thus, "...nobody can't do the things you be doing..." is a grammatical sentence in the dialect, meaning that nobody can do these things. To emphasize such a negative statement Black English speakers may prepose the negativized verbal auxiliary to the front of the sentence, much as the ordinary English yes-no question formation. Two kinds of stress pattern are associated with this structure. In verse 2, the stress pattern is "cán't nóbody (do the things...)", and expresses general emphasis. In verse 4, the stress pattern is "Cán't nobòdy (go back...)" which carries the overtone of disbelief.

8. The form "be" can be used in Black English as a verb in the same constructions in which "is, am, are, was, were" are used in Standard English, but with a different meaning. The use of "be" as a main verb denotes iteration or habituation. In verse 2 for example," the things you be doing" means that Nicodemus knows that Jesus repeatedly performs miracles.

9. Quotations are generally introduced by the form "say" in addition to any other quotative words such as "tell" and "ask."

10. In Black English, negation is typically marked not only in the main verb phrase, but also in each indefinite determiner or indefinite pronoun in the sentence, as well as in certain adverbs like "hardly" and "never".

11. The concept "jive" in the Negro ghetto refers to a particular form of language behavior in which the speaker assumes a guise in order to persuade someone of a particular fact. It is often used to refer to the deception of someone with flattery or false promises.

12. "Get" (or "got") functions as a passive marker in Black English.

13. When a pronoun ending in /t/ like "it" or "that" procedes the contracted form of "is", the contraction /s/ is pronounced and the /t/ is not. Cf. note 6.

14. Sentences which would have a pre-posed verbal auxiliary in Standard English due to the formation of a content question generally have no auxiliary at all in the corresponding Black English sentence. The "do" which would be required in Standard English in verse 9 is absent for this reason.

15. The expression "you call yourself X" or "you call yourself doing X" implies mild doubt that the hearer really is X or is doing X.

16. The concept "telling it like it is" refers to making an accurate and trustworthy assessment of a situation, without any attempt to exaggerate.

17. Like Greek, but unlike most Standard English dialects, Black English distinguishes the singular and plural of the second person pronoun ("you" versus "you'all", pronounced /yɔl/). The "you" in verse 12, "the things you can see" is really neither of these, but is the general "you" meaning "people" or "one".

18. This construction is potentially ambiguous. It could be an example of the pre-posed negative auxiliary (see note 7), or it could be a stylistic variety of "It ain't nobody who (has) gone up to Heaven" (Cf. note 1). In this context, the latter interpretation is indicated.

19. The use of 'done' plus the past tense of a verb is a construction indicating completed action.

20. -s plural can be suffixed to forms which in Standard English form their plural in some irregular way (suppletive forms, internal change, etc.).

21. Black English lacks possessive -s so that possession is indicated only by the order of items.

22. In a construction similar to the one mentioned in note 19, 'been' can be used with the past tense of a verb. This construction indicates action in the distant past. In verse 13, the phrase is read with stress on 'been'; "God bēen judged...".

23. When a pronoun in apposition refers to an indefinite, the pronoun is generally plural in Black English.